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AN INTERVIEW WITH RABBI DR. NORMAN LAMM: CONTINUED

What role does Am Yisrael's status as the am ha-nivhar play within our belief system?

The doctrine of *am hanivchar* - the election or chosenness of Israel — has been glorified and condemned, but mostly misunderstood, for the greater part of our history. Some have dismissed it with contempt and infamously compared it to the Nazi idea of the *Herrenvolk*; others have exaggerated its particularity as thoroughly genetic in nature; and yet others have diluted it to just about the point of making the notion both pointless and meaningless. Few other *ikkarim*, major principles of Judaism, have been subjected to such distortion.

The comparison to the foul ideology of Aryan racial superiority is a vicious canard that has been with us since the Enlightenment, but ratcheted up since the appearance of mass anti-Semitism in the twentieth century. The non-ideological discomfort that some modern Jews feel is more of a social nature — “what will my non-Jewish neighbors think of me/us when they hear of this boast?” and underlies a good deal of the embarrassment with the *am hanivchar* idea. And not far removed from this concern is its enfeeblement and eventual excision from the prayer book and educational material by many liberal- modernist Jewish groups.

Equally fallacious, if less deplorable, is the interpretation of chosenness in some Haredi and other, especially Hasidic, circles, namely, that Jews are religiously and spiritually superior to the rest of mankind and that this pre-eminence is genetically determined. Placing the concept on a biological basis is good for the collective ego but is poor scholarship and is untrue to our sacred texts. A critique of all these views will become explicit in the following paragraphs.

The doctrine of election is accepted by all great Jewish thinkers but not necessarily to the same degree. Thus, for instance, Rambam and a number of other Sephardic scholars of the Middle Ages accepted it, but did not give it the prominence accorded it by other Jewish thinkers. Rambam does not include it in his *Ani Ma'amins*. Other prominent sages, from Yehudah Halevi to the Maharal to the Tanya to Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook, expounded on the doctrine of chosenness and

gave it an especially high place in the hierarchy of Jewish precepts. But even those who did not emphasize it to the same extent obviously approved of it; else how did they recite the Kiddush or the blessing before the Shema?

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Moreover, and the Torah itself speaks of the Divine choosing of Abraham and, at Sinai, the people of Israel.

There are several questions that beg to be answered Among them: Who chose whom at Sinai? Why was this choice made in the first place? What about all the other nations of the world? Can strangers “join the club” if they were not originally Jewish?

The first to be chosen by God to bring His message to mankind was Abraham. His loyalty, his faith and his self-sacrifice made him the chosen one, and his children after him (the “seed of Abraham”) were to carry on this tradition despite all difficulties. At the Revelation at Sinai, the Divine Voice informed our ancestors that we are chosen to be a “holy nation” and His *segulah* or “special treasure,” and that He desired us and chose us not because we were numerous or great, for we were the smallest of all the peoples. Rather, we were chosen because He loved us and had promised our forefathers that He would redeem us from slavery. He wishes us to know at all times that He is faithful and keeps His promise made to our forebears in the covenant with them, and extends His Love for their descendants “unto a thousand generations” (Dt.: 7:-6-8).

There is nothing in these sacred texts that implies genetic or racial superiority of the “seed of Abraham,” nor that other peoples are inferior or less deserving of Divine compassion, nor that we were destined to rule the world or be given any special privileges other than observing the Torah and the mitzvot. On the contrary, chosenness implies a commitment to serve Him and thus become the teachers — willingly or unwillingly — to the rest of humankind. For in addition to declaring us a “holy nation,” we were simultaneously commissioned to be a “kingdom of priests,” a *goy kadosh* — a term which implies, as Ezekiel would later announced (22:26), that as a priest-people we were to teach the world the difference “between the holy and the profane, the pure and the impure.” The best term to describe this Divine mission is the French noblesse oblige. God loves all humans and therefore provided a single people to undertake the noble and historic task of bringing God to them and them to God.

Who chose whom at Sinai? The Talmud (*Avodah Zarah* 2a, b) records two famous versions of the giving of the Torah. One has the Almighty offering the Torah to various of the ancient peoples, all of whom objected to certain basic commandments; only Israel accepted the Torah in toto. The second has God coercing Israel to accept by threatening to bury them under that falling mountain. The difference between them is this: The first tells us that the Jews chose God; the second, that God chose the Jews.

I believe that both versions must be read together; both, paradoxically, are equally and simultaneously true. There was and is a mutual “choosing.” When we are born, we are inducted into the Covenant of Avraham and confirmed as members of the Chosen People — whether we like it or not. We are the chosen, not the choosers. But as we learn and mature, we come into our role not by coercion or habit but by will and love and eagerness. Jews who reject the “yoke of Torah” are condemned to being the subject of Divine duress. They are, no matter how much they try, Jews by birth only. They often suffer from their Jewish identity — anti-Semitism and confusion about the State of Israel and spiritual rootlessness — and do not taste of the glory of Jewishness. Only when we turn around and choose Him and His Torah, of our own free will, do we experience the dignity and delight of being Jewish. Our

choosing God is as important as His choosing us.

Finally, “Israel” is not described anywhere as a racial genetic group, thus excluding all the rest of mankind from the opportunity to serve Him as part of the “holy nation” and “kingdom of priests.” Were this so, we would never be permitted to accept proselytes from other nations. Those who advocate such a narrow view must explain why, according to the Midrash, Abraham and Sara were the first to enlist pagans as *gerim*, and why the Tradition affirms that the souls of proselytes of all generations were present at the Revelation—“those who are here standing with us this day... and those who are not with us here this day” (Dt. 29:14) — a phrase that intends not only future generations of Jews from birth but also true proselytes (*Tosefta, Sotah* 7:3).

Furthermore, there are references to *yir'ei Hashem*, God-fearing people, especially in *Tehilim*. Who are these people? Ibn Ezra in four places in his commentary to Psalms, identifies them as Gentiles who fear God. So too does R. David Altschuler, in his *Metzudot* David and R. Yaakov Tzevi Meklenberg in his *Ha-Ketav ve'ha-Kabbalah*

What binds the generations of Jews together is not biology but a culture of faith that is transmitted not by genes but by a shared history and a shared destiny, a faith of commitment to and act in a manner that will lead to a life of holiness. Those bonds are powerful, and they are not impenetrable to those who yearn to accept upon themselves the mitzvot and the noblesse oblige.

A few decades ago a scholar wrote a dissertation at Columbia University in which he conclusively demonstrated that, amongst the Tannaim, the more a Tanna emphasized the "doctrine of election," the more pronounced was his universalism. Not only is there no conflict between the two but, surprisingly, cho-senness affirms universalism.

The more Jewish you are, the more do you — and should you — care for the rest of the world.

“Academic” approaches to the study of Jewish texts - from Tanakh, to Gemara, to responsa literature - are sometimes perceived as being in conflict with certain aspects of Emunah. How would Rav Lamm assess this perception of academic Jewish studies? What sort of role should “academic” methodologies play

in a Yeshiva University curriculum?

In answer to your question, I do not believe that academic approaches to sacred texts are necessarily in conflict with *emunah*. After all, our faith is challenged and often attenuated by hunger, luxury, persecution, the ubiquity of sexual temptation, and so on. Popular culture is usually in conflict with some of our received teachings and is menacing to our way of life. Yet we do not and should not condemn all of contemporary culture, even when it is in occasional conflict with principles of Judaism. Scientism (the worship of science) is deplorable, but science must be treated with respect. Popular literature is usually of no importance to a serious *ben Torah*, but truly great literature is serious and should not be dismissed although certainly it need not be accepted as authoritative. As for potential problems posed by academic approaches, we should not minimize them, but put them into perspective. People of genuine *emunah* were and are almost always faced with challenges. It was true in the ancient world and is true today in our contemporary world. Yet we managed to survive without banning all human thinking from our learning and teaching—at least not in our Torah UMadda circles. Avoiding a challenge may be temporarily soothing, but ultimately self-defeating.

Essentially, academic approaches should be subsumed under “Madda” which, in turn, can be divided into two parts: first, that which has no direct bearing on *Talmud Torah*, but which impinges on one’s religious consciousness. This can sometimes prove deleterious to our spiritual sensitivities, but equally can reinforce and deepen our faith and *yirat*

shamayim. Example: contemplation of the vastness and the overwhelming complexity of the cosmos may make us question the significance of individual human beings and the ultimate meaningfulness of life itself. But more often, this becomes the spur to *ahavat ha-Shem* and a rousing affirmation of the wisdom of the Creator and the justification of our faith in Him - which is what Rambam explicitly writes in his *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah*.

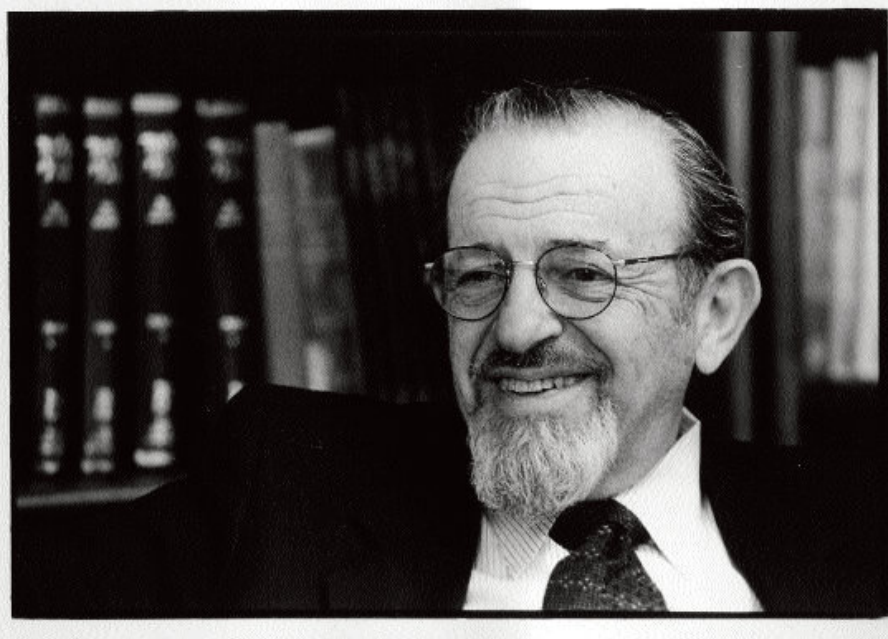
The second aspect is that which concerns itself not with our overall faith commitments but with specific parts of *Talmud Torah*. Here too the brunt of such academic interpretations of halakhic texts can be harmful or helpful. It is worth examining each in turn.

Let us say that in the course of academic research you conclude that the Gemara’s interpretation of a *baraita* was mistaken, as a result of which the *pesak Halakha* should be reversed (assuming, of course, that the process of so deciding is compelling). We are then indeed faced with a problem of considerable significance. Should we continue practicing the traditionally accepted *Halakha* and be false to our conscience, or should we change our conduct and fly in the face of centuries of sanctified practice? Which prevails: truth or tradition?

My approach is that we err if we put the question in such stark either/or terms. Halakhic truth differs from historic or factual or conventional truth or any other kind of truth. (It is, I believe, wrong and even immature to aver

that there is only one truth and no other.) Proof: *Tanur shel Akhnai* (B.M. 59b): the Talmud records a debate amongst the Tannaim as to the purity or impurity of a kind of earthen oven. R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus declared it tahor, while R. Yehoshua considered it tamei. Whereupon the former invoked all kinds of supernatural miracles to support his halakhic decision. R. Yehoshua dismissed all of them, including the final “proof” of R. Eliezer, namely, the *Bat Kol* which favored R. Eliezer. In other words, halakhic truth, decided by majority vote of great but ultimately fallible human beings, prevails over a direct revelation of the divine will!

Halakhic tradition is decided by the halakhic process, not by some external (even divine) standard. That being the case, even if our research leads us to conclude that technical errors crept into the *Mesorah* in the course of history, we can live with such “error.” This is



another example of the view that halakhic practice is not ontological; it is not a statement about objective, ultimate truth, but rather it addresses our subjectivity, it is about a way of living a life of sanctity. This is made clear in a statement by Rav (Ber.R. 44a) that the *mitzvot* were given in order to purify people, to make them aware of the Divine Presence, to train them to a life of *kedushah*; the *mitzvot* are not intrinsic, but a means to a higher end. Hence, even if by the standard of academic Judaica there was positive proof of a wrong decision at one time, the “erroneous” decision has already been incorporated into the body of *Halakha* and is as binding upon us as if it were a *Halakha le’Moshe mi’Sinai*.

For further evidence of the non-ontic nature of the *mitzvot*, note *ki im tzadakta mah titen li* (Job 35:7), which freely translated means, “even if you are righteous, it is not for Me but for yourself” (and see Ramban to Dt. 10:12). Also, since all the *chagim* depend upon when the Sanhedrin declares the new month has begun, their *kedushah* is not inherent but derives from human activity.

But, as I indicated, academic skills can certainly be used to enhance our *Talmud Torah*.

More than once, in my own learning, have I found myself puzzled in trying to penetrate a *sugya* which I considered opaque, and found so-called “academic Judaica” to be of great help. An alternate reading found in a Ms. cited in the *Dikdukei Soferim* can help elucidate many a passage that is otherwise puzzling or even incomprehensible. While personally I do not as a matter of practice spend much time on variant readings, they do prove most helpful in many cases. There is no one methodology or *derekh* that is inherently superior to others; it is all a matter of intellectual conviction, taste, orientation, and personal choice. Hence, everyone is entitled to use whatever satisfies him in attempting to understand *devar Hashem zu Halakha*. But there is no reason, other than habit or intellectual comfort, to fail to make use of parallel sources such as Yerushalmi, Tosefta, the halakhic Midrashim, etc.

wistful remark as to what gives him personally the most spiritual pleasure - it is Torah, in which he delights - and that is certainly no surprise. I assume that all of us, me included, feel that we derive our greatest intellectual fulfillment and spiritual enjoyment from the study of Torah even though we do not denigrate the independent role of Madda in our lives.) What the Rambam is doing is saying that the “other wisdoms” serve two functions: on one level, they have innate value because they explain the world which the Almighty created, and this contemplation leads us to a genuine religious experience; this is Torah UMadda in its broadest sense. And second, they serve specifically to enhance the study of Torah. This latter function fits nicely into the rubric of academic study as propaedeutic to our *Talmud Torah*, enriching it - and us. In this sense, of course, academic study of sacred texts can certainly be considered as helpful.

A word of caution: When the *ben Torah* undertakes to study any academic discipline, whether scientific or humanistic, he should bear in mind that each discipline must be pursued truthfully, that is, without prejudice to its principles or conclusions. Each discipline deserves to be studied with an open and honest mind. Only afterwards should we look back and see how this comports with our understanding of Judaism - halakhic or aggadic. But we must treat each non-Torah discipline according to its own methodology.

Finally, just as in learning Torah we must bear in mind the importance of human dignity, *kevod ha-beriot*, so when we engage in “secular” studies must we not forget the centrality of the human being, who was created “in the image of God.” Whether engaging in a laboratory sciences or business or literature, the integrity of the human soul must always be respected even if, as often happens, it is neglected by practitioners in the field.

In all cases, we must accept as a foregone conclusion that while a great deal of what we study in the academic world may be helpful in support of religion, much of it is certainly antagonistic. While it is important for all of us to have a “taste” of those worlds, we must leave deep involvement in such disciplines to those who are ready to devote their time and energy to fully explore them and to remember that their first obligation is to Torah and their ultimate commitment is to the Almighty, and not to submit to the latest fashionable *apikor-sus*.

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I am convinced that this form of academic assistance in learning too is a form of Madda; it is using non-traditional methods to assist us in understanding Torah. Indeed, an excellent example of this can be found in the Rambam in a famous *teshuvah* in which he refers to “secular wisdom” as *rakkachot ve’tabbachot ve’ofot* - a locution denoting servants or helpers, preparing the way for Torah. Opponents of Torah UMadda quite erroneously point to this responsum to argue that the Rambam regretted his high estimation of philosophy and science in the hierarchy of disciplines contained in the *Pardes*, thus undermining the usual conception of Maimonidean espousal of a positive view towards Torah UMadda, reducing all worldly knowledge to the rank of mere instruments, devoid of any inherent value.

However, I believe this is simply not so. (In my Torah UMadda, chapter 4, I point out that some of the most significant authorities on Rambam, such as the late R. Kapach, have questioned the authenticity of this letter. Moreover, the overwhelming weight of Rambam’s writing solidly supports the autonomous role that *chokhmah* plays in Maimonidean thought. In all probability, therefore, he is offering a